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Ghost Haunts Small Virginia Church

Bowie Goodman, an 85 - year - old parishoner who has attended Olive Branch Church since he was young, says the ghost stories are an affront to Christianity. He is afraid that efforts to catch the ghost might result in harm to the church.

By TOM TIEDE

AUSTINVILLE, Va. — (NEA) — For as long as anyone can remember there have been strange doings at the Olive Branch Methodist Church. In the dead of the night, when conditions are right, an eerie light glows in the window of the hilltop tabernacle. The cause is unknown, but some people here think a ghost is at play.

Undeniably, the church is an ideal location for a mischievous spirit. Constructed in 1833, it is isolated on the bend of a lonely road and sits hard by a seedy cemetery. Believers reason that one of the graves is open ended, that is to say it has access to both worlds, and its restless inhabitant comes back and forth at will.

This seems melodramatic, residents admit, but how else to explain the phenomenon? Kenneth Dean, who lives down the road from the church, swears he has not only seen the night light, but "once when I came be I saw this white thing floating across the road." Scout's honor, Dean says: "Ask my mother, she saw the same thing."

Assuredly, many people have seen and heard the doings at the Olive Branch Church. On the weekends here, cars full of witnesses line the road. Currie Moore, a miner, says people see the light almost every evening now: "When the light appears, the people get noisy, then they quiet down again and wait for it to come back."

For all of its regularity, the light is variously described by those who've experienced it. Some say it's a blue light, which squares with the color of the tint in the church window. Others, however, insist the light is white. And 15-year-old Fred Coble says the glow is "yalla," which in southern Virginia is yellow.

Whatever its color, arguments concerning the light's origin are equally confusing. Some believe the glow is an effect of the church furnace, but others point out the furnace is in the basement and the light is on the first floor. Similarly, many feel it's some kind of prank by children — but night after night for decades?

Currie Moore says that nearby high-voltage wires have often been suspect. "When it's very dark, the wires will glow, and some people think this may be reflected by the church window." Possibly. Yet here again the eyewitnesses scoff. The high-voltage wires glow occasionally, they say, but the church light can be seen every night.

Rationality thus denied, many people in this hill country community attempt to explain the light in other ways. Legends abound. One man says the light is caused by a veteran of the Confederacy, buried in the cemetery, waiting for the South to rise again. Yuk, yuk. Most believers here harbor senses of humor as well as superstition.

Church members, however, fail to see the whimsy of the situation. Eighty-five-year-old Bowie Goodman, in attendance at Olive Branch since he was a tad, says the ghost stories are an affront to Christianity. He also says they make the congregation nervous, and the 30-member chapel can ill afford to lose a single jittery soul.

What's more, says Goodman, the hordes of people who come here to see the light are a potential problem. "One of these nights one of them is going to get a load on, storm the church, and tear the place up." Already someone has broken into the building, perhaps in search of the light; Goodman says almost anything might happen.

For the sake of the church, then, several members recently conducted an investigation to find the source of the light. Led by church superintendent Luther Armbrister and Goodman's wife, Gracie, the members armed themselves with synchronized watches and common sense.

Says Mrs. Goodman: "There is a bend in the road beyond the cemetery that drops sharply over a hill. We suspected that when cars came over that hill, their lights might hit the church. Sure enough, we tested it and they do. We did it several times, and each time the car lights were clearly reflected on the side of the church."

Case solved? Well, not for some people. Critics of the experiment point out that the car lights came from the north side of the church, but the eerie window light appears on the southern face of the building. Besides, car lights reflect in all the windows and the mystery here is that the ghost light appears in only one.

And so the superstition remains alive and well at the Olive Branch Methodist Church, even if the ghost is dead and fitful. Many townspeople, especially the younger ones, are just as happy; this is a small village, there's not much to do, and kids say Olive Branch is an ideal place to take one's date and, uh, watch for ghosts.

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